

# CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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## Contra Costa Times editorial: Federal rule requiring removal of trees from levees makes no sense

Contra Costa Times editorial  
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Posted: 12/21/2011 04:00:00 PM PST

Updated: 12/21/2011 06:01:31 PM PST

One might think a regulation that requires great expenditure only to make a situation worse would be easy to remedy. However, that has not been the case with a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' rule that mandates the removal of trees and shrubs from federally designed and built levees.

The regulation makes no sense and in fact would weaken the hundreds of miles of levees in and around the Delta. The trees and bushes, which lessen erosion, hold the earthen levees together and provide habitat for birds. Yet unless they are removed, there will be no federal funding for levee repairs after a flood.

Years of discussion among federal, state and regional officials have proved fruitless. As a result, Friends of the River and other environmental organizations in June launched a lawsuit against the Corps of Engineers. Last month, the state Department of Fish and Game petitioned the federal court to join the suit.

It condemned the tree-removal rule, saying it would "do incredible damage to California's remaining riparian and adjacent riverine ecosystem."

State and local levee management agencies say compliance would cost at least \$7.5 billion to remove the vegetation from about 2,100 miles or 15 percent of the levees in California, including about 100 miles of levees in San Francisco Bay.

The tree removal would not offer any more flood protection and actually contradicts Corps engineering studies that show vegetation protects

levees

by slowing flows and strengthening levees. The rule also violates federal environmental protections.

Rep. John Garamendi, who lives on a levee in Walnut Grove, says local flood control district managers -- not Washington bureaucrats -- know what is necessary to protect their levees: "The Corps has set a one-size-fits all-policy. But would the Army buy the same size boot for every soldier?"

Despite the obvious inanity of the tree-removal rule, the Corps remains opposed to changing it. We like to think that those suing the Corps will prevail, but there is no guarantee.

However, a solution could be found without a suit if the Corps is persuaded to at least reach a compromise that allows healthy trees and bushes to remain at least on the water side of the levees.

Leon Panetta, a California resident who is now the secretary of Defense, oversees the Army Corps of Engineers. We urge him to prevail upon the Corps to help the state keep trees on the levees to protect them and the wildlife that depend on them.

It makes little sense for a bureaucracy to insist on enforcing rules that are not only unnecessary but also are likely to cause far more harm than good.

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